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Ladies at the Loom: Examining Intersections of Gender and Textiles in New Kingdom Egypt

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LADIES AT THE LOOM: EXAMINING INTERSECTIONS OF GENDER AND TEXTILES IN NEW KINGDOM EGYPT

by

Caitlin Patton

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with Honors in the Ancient Civilization

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Rosemary Moore
Thesis Mentor

Spring 2020

All requirements for graduation with Honors in the
Ancient Civilization have been completed.

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LADIES AT THE LOOM:
EXAMINING INTERSECTIONS OF GENDER AND TEXTILES IN NEW KINGDOM EGYPT

by

Caitlin N. Patton

Rosemary Moore, Faculty Mentor

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for a
Degree in Bachelor in Arts
with Honors in Ancient Civilizations

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Iowa City, Iowa
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Abstract

In a society like New Kingdom Dynastic Egypt, where men's perspectives and spheres of influence dominated the literary and artistic output, insight into womens' lives often must come from sources outside of state-sponsored programs. New Kingdom women's lives centered around the home and included keeping up the house, raising children and the production of clothing and textiles. Women produced these textiles not only for themselves and their families but, in an age before standardized currency, they also produced them as valuable commodities to trade and sell. This led to women not only dominating the trends within Egyptian clothing and textiles throughout the New Kingdom, but also driving the growth of the New Kingdom economy through the valuable product of linen. This project aims to examine women in New Kingdom Egypt and how their societal perception and role intersects with the textile industry, ultimately demonstrating that clothing and textiles give women the power to affect change, demonstrate their skills, and exert control within a socially acceptable space.

Basics of Textile Production

Compared to other civilizations in antiquity, the amount of surviving textiles and weaving materials mean that the process and fibers of Egyptian textile production are relatively well-documented and understood. Due to both the hot, dry climate of the Sahara desert, as well as the focus on grave goods within Egyptian society, archaeologists have recovered examples both of clothing and textiles from multiple levels of society. Additionally, the existence of Amarna, the abandoned capital during Akhenaten's reign, gave scholars insight into life and societal structure during the New Kingdom period.

Flax was the chief material used in the production of Egyptian linen. Flax thrives in silty and clay soil, much like those found along the banks of the Nile, making Egypt the "foremost producers of linen cloth until the twelfth century." New Kingdom texts even refer to the land as "the flax fields of the Pharaoh"[1] The harvesting and collecting of flax, where farmers pull fibers in bundles from the inner bark of the flax stalk, is well-documented in tomb paintings that depict other agricultural scenes like the harvesting of grains. From there, the flax is combed through in order to remove the woody bits caught in the fibers and further processed through soaking the fibers and then drying and beating them. Only after this tedious, multi-step fiber processing is the flax ready to be spun into threads that can be woven into larger textiles.

[1] Barry Kemp and Gillian Vogelsang-Eastwood, *The Ancient Textile Industry at Amarna*, (London, Egypt Exploration Society, 2001), 27

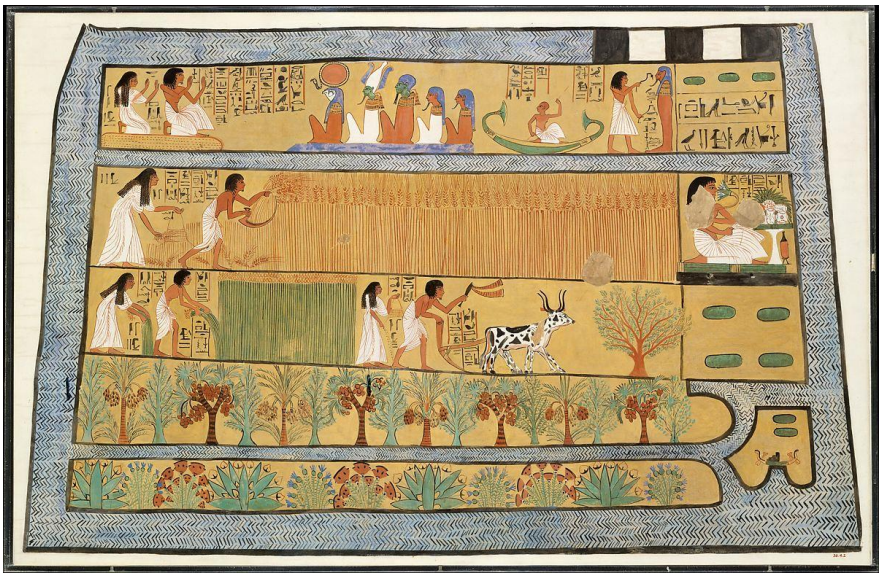

Fig. 1. Farmers pulling flax and harvesting wheat: from Wilkinson, Charles K. "Sennedjem and Iineferti in the Fields of Iaru." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 1922.

In addition to flax, wool from both sheep and goats provided the other main supply of Egyptian textiles. Both species were amongst the earliest domesticated animals in Neolithic Egypt and majority of the sheep's wool from New Kingdom likely came from the type of sheep known as the "Horns of Amun," known for their shorter, regular fleece coat compared to the hair coat of the other Egyptian sheep[2]. This breed of sheep became more widespread throughout Egypt since, despite the minority of wool compared to the more plentiful linen textiles, "the importance of (the Horns of Amun)… was its wool… Sheep were part of the normal agricultural economy in New Kingdom Egypt… Wool or fleeces, therefore, were inescapably present in Egypt"[3]. Goat hair was also used since, as the second most common animal found at sites like the Amarna Workmen's Village, their hair was one of many products that could be used around the house making sacks and mixing with the fibers of sheep's wool to strengthen the material.

[2] Ibid. 34
[3] Ibid. 54

After the flax fibers have been soaked and pounded, they are ready to be spun into workable threads and yarn. Since each step of the textile process was done by hand, workers could pick out the highest quality fiber strands for spinning. The fibers, which were twisted into hanks after the drying and pounding, were further separated into finer strands 5 cm in length, and then twisted together through a process of interlocking and twisting threads into one workable strand. This process combined "S-curve" twists and "Z-curve"[4] twists in order to create strong, tight threads.This is further strengthened through the use of a suspended spindle, which the spinner hold and hangs down, thereby adding weight and tension to the threads, as well as allowing workers to use greater amounts of thread due to the finished thread collecting at the bottom. Once all the fibers are woven together, they are finally ready to be woven into functional textiles.

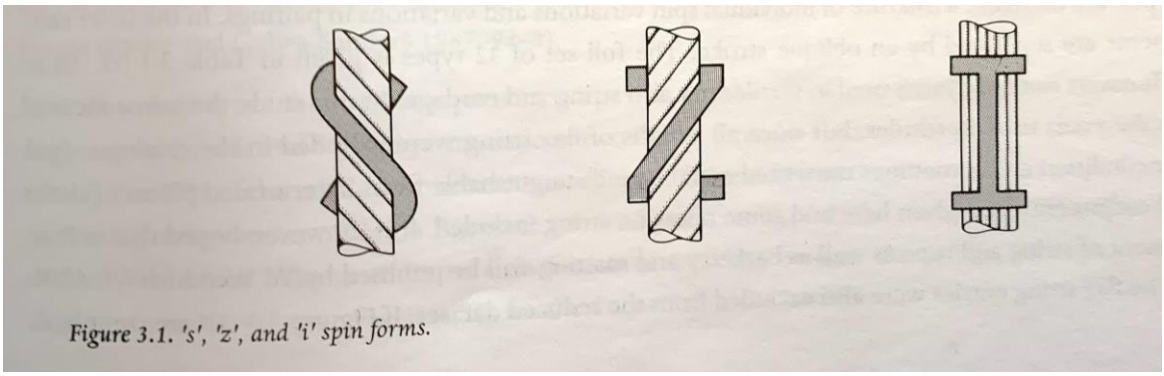

Fig. 2. Thread twisting: from Vogelsang-Eastwood, Gillian and Barry Kemp. "The Ancient Textile Industry at Amarna." *Egypt Exploration Society*, 2001, pg. 59.

While the weaving process allowed for many variations on the types of weaves in textiles, this essay will focus mainly on the technique and use of the basic weaves. Most textiles were woven from flax fibers in one of two weaves: the tabby weave (also sometimes known as the half-basket) and the basket weave, where the weaver would weave in pairs of threads (two

[4] Ibid. 63

over, two under) rather than the single strands of the tabby weave. The tabby weave seems to have been the norm overall, as it produced more fine, delicate textiles used in linen garments, although the basket weave was used for items that required more firmness and durability. In both cases, fibers are woven on a loom, with horizontal looms common during the Old and Middle Kingdom and vertical looms becoming more standard in the New Kingdom, that involved strands being interlaced together with tight, delicate handling. This interleaving is done with the warp and weft strands, with the warp strands being tied tight and static on either end of the loom and the weft strands being drawn through the warp strands in an over-and-under pattern.

One piece in particular, from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, containing 200 by 100 threads per square inch[5], demonstrates the quality of the flax threads used and the skill of the weavers themselves. This was possible, not only because of the handcrafted nature of the weaving, but also because of the second warp beam on their looms, which allowed weavers to add more warp threads and keep them woven more tightly and closely than previous models. The relatively simple construction of looms allowed for a quick setup and tear down. This was a huge advantage for the average Egyptian woman, who would likely be weaving textiles for her family in her own home. These looms would produce long, rectangular textiles with a starting-border, the weave itself, a finishing edge or border at the end, and then selvedge edges on either side. These finishing edges were the loose threads left at the end of a woven textile tied or braided off into warp fringes. With this basic setup, weavers could produce textiles of various uses, from garments to wrappings, to blankets.

[5] Charlotte Clark, “Egyptian Weaving in 2000 B.C.” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 3, no. 1 (New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art,1994) 24

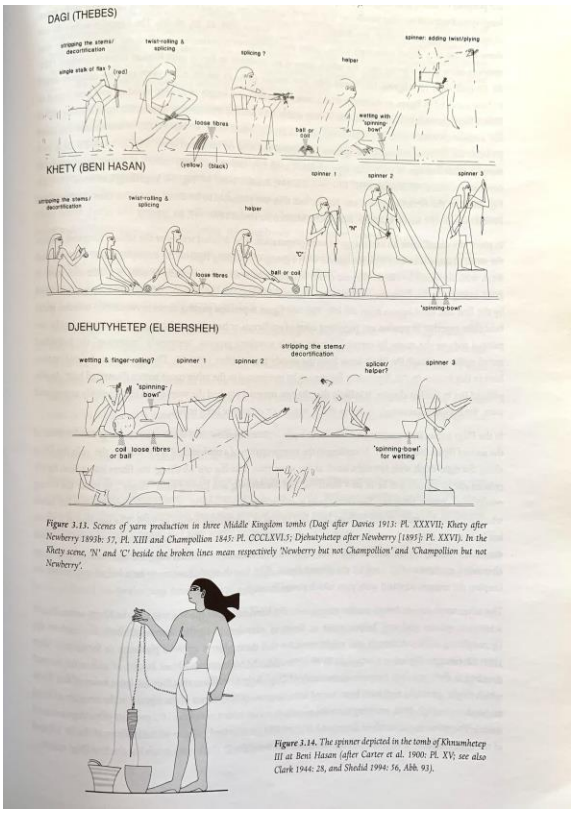

Figure 3.13. Scenes of yarn production in three Middle Kingdom tombs (Dagi after Davies 1913: Pl. XXXVII; Khety after Newberry 1893b: 57, Pl. XIII and Champollion 1843: Pl. CCCLXVI.3; Djehutyhetep after Newberry [1895]: Pl. XXVI). In the Khety scene, 'N' and 'C' beside the broken lines mean respectively 'Newberry but not Champollion' and 'Champollion but not Newberry'.

Figure 3.14. The spinner depicted in the tomb of Khnumhetep III at Beni Hasan (after Carter et al. 1900: Pl. XV; see also Clark 1944: 28, and Shedid 1994: 56, Abb. 93).

Fig. 3. Spinning diagram: from Vogelsang-Eastwood, Gillian and Barry Kemp. "The Ancient Textile Industry at Amarna." *Egypt Exploration Society*, 2001, pg. 68.

While archaeologists have recovered many parts of looms and textiles from tombs and workmen's villages, much of what scholars know of the process of textile production comes from depictions in tomb paintings and models.

Examining Extant Garments and Textiles

After mastering the spinning and weaving process, workers weave these fibers into clothing and textile pieces, which can tell scholars a lot about styles of dress and the types of materials produced. Though there are very few surviving garments from any point in Pharaonic history, the few that do exist can give archaeologists an idea of both the key traits of Egyptian clothing and wider trends throughout the New Kingdom.

While textile fragments are found in a variety of locations, with several hundred located in the workmen's village and surrounding area at Amarna, all surviving, near-complete examples come from tombs. These tomb caches are the most valuable resources for archaeologists and textile scholars, due to their isolated preservation and the variety of types of garments due to the necessity for having a complete wardrobe in the afterlife. Some of these, like the tomb of Kha, even hold many items, with "fifty triangular loincloths" inside the tomb and some wrapped around a bag-tunic in order to serve as a complete set of everyday clothing[6]. Most examples of surviving textiles come from the eighteenth dynasty, throughout the reigns of Thutmose IV, Akhenaten, and Tutankhamun. As outlined in the article on Textile Culture, "the vast majority of textiles were plain weave… through variation in the thickness of threads and density of weave, both sheer and coarse textiles were produced"[7]. The styles of dress largely did not change between upper and lower classes and instead, class was indicated by the level of embellishment and fineness of the linen, most famously the bleached "white linen" worn by royalty[8]. This included a thick linen tunic featured in the article, from the tomb of Kha and Merit, as well as sheets of knotted linen bedding. In addition to the linen itself, the tunic also serves as an example of one of the staples of Egyptian clothing, the bag tunic.

The bag tunic, as Gillian Vogelsang-Anderson explains in her book, *Pharaonic Egyptian Clothing*, was one of the most common garments for men, women, and children and "numerous tunics have come from New Kingdom sources… with considerably more tunics have been found in slightly later New Kingdom tombs, notably… the tomb of Kha, Deir el-Medina, and the tomb

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[6] Gillian Vogelsang-Eastwood, *Pharaonic Egyptian Clothing*, (Leiden, Brill, 1993) 10-12
[7] Suzanna Harris, "From the Parochial to the Universal: Comparing Cloth Cultures in the Bronze Age" *European Journal of Archaeology* 15, no. 1 (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012), 77
[8] Jana Jones, "Textiles, Pharaonic Egypt" *Encyclopedia of Ancient History* (Wiley, 2012) doi:10.1002/9781444338386.wbeah15392

of Tutankhamen"[9]. She goes into further detail about the tunics in Kha's tomb, with twenty-six of them in total, and going into the variations within the collections, saying "some are decorated with tapestry and compound weave bands, others have sleeves. All however, have a cut-out neck and small ties"[10]. On the whole, the bag tunic represents the larger innovations within New Kingdom styles of dress, with the prevalence of this garment in comparison to the earlier wraparound style possibly indicating that "the bag-tunic replaced several wraparound garments… like the archaic tunic and v-necked dress (which) seemed to have disappeared by the New Kingdom"[11] though evidence is not conclusive as of yet. The number of tombs with bag-tunics, as well as the number and variety of styles within these tombs, demonstrates both that the bag-tunic was a staple of the Egyptian wardrobe, and that its versatility with both seasons and decoration illustrates its importance to the average Egyptian.

[9] Vogelsang-Eastwood, *Pharaonic Clothing*, 131-132
[10] Ibid. 132
[11] Ibid. 153

Fig. 4. Tunic from the tomb of Kha: from Harris, Suzanna. “From the Parochial to the Universal: Comparing Cloth Cultures in the Bronze Age”. *European Journal of Archaeology*, 2012.

The greatest source of complete, surviving New Kingdom textiles is, unsurprisingly, the tomb of Tutankhamen. Due to its intact nature and the variety of textiles related to both clothing and everyday objects, the tomb serves as an important example of the trends that happened in the Egyptian textile industry at the time, particularly the greater appearance of colorful, patterned fabrics. In addition to the standard undergarments like loincloths and kilts, Tutankhamen’s tomb also contains elaborate royal jewelry and, for our purposes, tunics. The “Tunic of Tutankhamen” housed at the Cairo Museum features colorful woven appliqués along its sides and front, earning it high regard both as an accomplished work of textile craft and an example of the innovations in embroidery and weaving in the New Kingdom. According to the evidence in both surviving textiles and artistic depictions, the majority of Egyptian clothing had minimal embroidery, making this tunic a fascinating outlier due to its Syrian style embroidery. Speculation on this

garment and its embroidery varies, from it being a gift from a foreign ruler or made by "a captive craftsperson"[12] in Egypt, as Nancy Hoskins speculates. Despite the unusual embellishment for the time and place, there are still several hallmarks of both Egyptian clothing and culture present. The embroidery and appliqué design around the collar mimics the ankh, the hieroglyph for "life" and was also associated with the life giving power of the pharaoh. This foreign influence, both in the greater amount of decoration on clothing as well as the style variations, foreshadows the Kush and Hellenistic influences that appear even more in the late Dynastic Period, as Aleksandra Hallmann points out in her study of a Kushite cloak on a 25th Dynasty stelae[13].

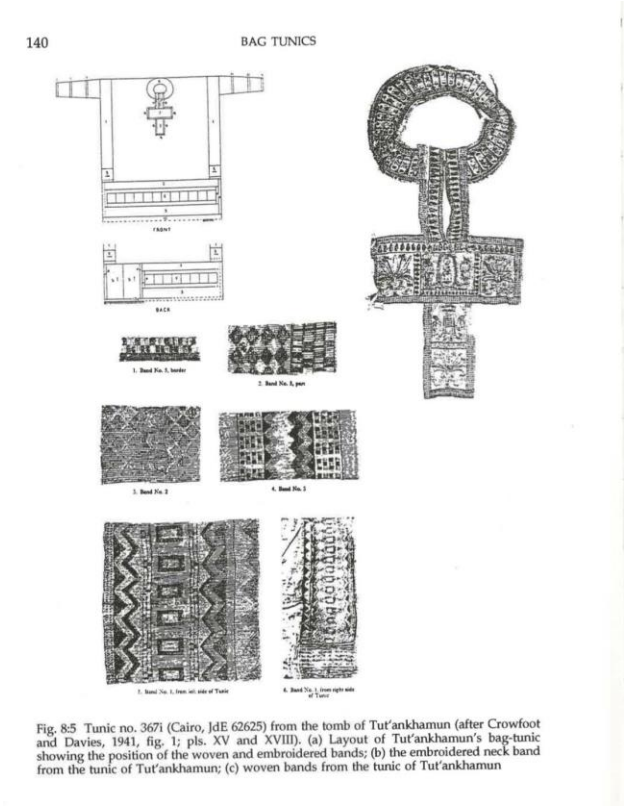

Fig. 8:5 Tunic no. 367i (Cairo, JdE 62625) from the tomb of Tut'ankhamun (after Crowfoot and Davies, 1941, fig. 1; pls. XV and XVIII). (a) Layout of Tut'ankhamun's bag-tunic showing the position of the woven and embroidered bands; (b) the embroidered neck band from the tunic of Tut'ankhamun; (c) woven bands from the tunic of Tut'ankhamun

Fig. 5. Tutankhamen's tunic: from Vogelsang-Eastwood, Gillian. "Pharaonic Egyptian Clothing." *Brill Academic Pub*, 1993.

[12] Nancy Arthur Hoskins, "Woven Patterns on Tutankhamun Textiles" *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 47, (Cairo, American Research Center in Egypt, 2011), 199-200

[13] Aleksandra Hallmann, "The 'Kushite Cloak' of Pekartror and Iriketakana: Novelty of Tradition?" *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 43, (Cairo, American Research Center in Egypt, 2007), 15

Presentation of Dress and Gender in Egyptian Art

Aside from textile fragments, the majority of scholarly knowledge regarding Egyptian clothing and textiles comes from artistic depictions. Tomb paintings, sculpture, and papyrus drawings offer depictions of (mainly upper class) women and clothing in daily life. Examining these depictions not only provides insight into Egyptian artistic tradition in the New Kingdom, but also offers ways that textiles helped shape the depiction of the human body.

When discussing the presentation of clothing in Egyptian art, it is key that one understands the fundamental philosophies of Egyptian art and the artistic conventions that will affect how one should interpret each work. Egyptian art was not meant to depict forms that reflect reality, but rather endeavored to depict all aspects of the human form, since the Egyptians reasoned that "if a part of the body wasn't seen, it didn't exist"[14] which led to the development of the distinct two-dimensional Impressionism. Egyptian artistic conventions also valued depictions of idealized beauty over more individualized portraits. Many of the figures depicted in tomb paintings emphasize youth and vitality, even if the actual individuals were much older or less physically appealing.

The features and poses of figures were vital for not only conveying the distinctions of class and importance, but also the performance of gender. Size was an important element of Egyptian art in indicating importance, as men were almost always larger than women, who were also larger than children, and figures like the pharaoh or various gods also stand much larger than other humans in the scene. Male figures are generally depicted much larger than female figures due to men typically being the "figure of honor" in a burial context and, if a female figure

[14] Joyce Tyldesley, *Daughters of Isis*, (London, Penguin Adult Publishing, 1995), 23

is depicted in a large, prestigious position, male figures are not shown alongside them, "so that the male would not be placed in a subordinate position."[15]

Both masculine and feminine figures had importance within Egyptian art, as well as their own conventions and symbolism. Male beauty was prized in Egyptian art, with a "celebration of masculine hardness"[16] found in the muscular, triangular physiques of most figures. These physiques are at their most clean and decorated for upper-class men, who groomed and adorned themselves with jewelry, unlike the more plain and scruffy common folk. The exceptions to these depictions of fit, youthful bodies are in the art of the scribes, whose rolls of fat indicate their success and sedentary lifestyle, unlike the populace who work the fields or the pharaoh who hunts and fights great battles. This tension between depictions of scribes versus more idealized masculinity exemplifies the wider array of roles of men in society.

By contrast, women in Egyptian art had far more homogenous body types, which reflected the more limited roles for women. Fat women, unlike fat men, were never depicted on tomb art, and instead have uniformly slender and fit bodies. Women as the "fairer sex" typically had lighter skin, as they spent most of their day inside. Their features reflect the beauty ideals for Egyptian women which, as one love poem describes, consist of features like "long of neck, white of breast, her hair of true lapis lazuli"[17]. The central female figures in formal paintings were typically wives or daughters of upper-class men (men who typically commissioned these works) and the artists therefore place most of the focus on the men paying for the artwork and do not see the women as anything more than supplementary figures[18].

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[15] Carolyn Graves-Brown, Sex and Gender in Ancient Egypt, (Swansea, Classical Press of Whales, 2008), 158
[16] Ibid. 123
[17] Ibid. 65
[18] Ibid. 50

Clothing was vital both in indicating gender presentation, as well as class and age. While there were no social stigmas against nudity in Egyptian society, upper-class women were exclusively depicted with the fine linen dresses and jewelry befitting their rank, and nudity is instead used as artistic shorthand for lower-class figures and children[19]. Dresses usually consisted of white linen, and the distinctions between class and importance usually relied on accessories and the style of pleating and draping. Lower-class women dressed in plain, largely functional variations on the djellaba, a nightshirt-like garment, and scholars speculate that artists (consisting of men drawing from memory) likely didn't notice many of the subtle nuances in everyday womens' dress[20]. Upper-class women had a much wider variety of styles and features, with noticeable trends between each period of Dynastic history. Old Kingdom styles favored a moderate sheath that extended from the breast to the shin, held up by two shoulder straps. Artistic depictions of this style illustrate that the dress was extremely tight and highlighted the contours of the body. Lynn Meskell even points out in her book, *Private Life in New Kingdom Egypt,* that in the extant garments from this period, they show "no signs of being tailored to fit, and no darts to indicate shaping"[21]. In light of this, it is not clear how much of this is accurate and how much was done for artistic eroticism. Scholars theorize that this tightness was meant to convey the passive role that women had to the men in their lives, with one claiming the tight dresses as "creating a hobbled effect and the extremely limited range of tasks women are portrayed as performing"[22]. New Kingdom styles of dress became more elaborate and fanciful, with more pleats and fringes, as well as similarly decorated wigs[23]. Dresses were depicted as less

[19] Tyldesley, *Daughters*, 161-162
[20] Ibid. 167
[21] Lynn Meskell, *Private Life in New Kingdom Egypt*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2002), 162
[22] Graves-Brown, *Sex and Gender*, 158
[23] Tyldesley, *Daughters*, 168-170

constricting, with the main components being draped around the body and tied under the bust in a more sophisticated evolution of the wraparound dresses in the Old and Middle Kingdom. The older style still remained, but it was now covered by a flowing robe, maintaining the loose, draped style.

In addition to the depiction of clothing, Egyptian art also had specific conventions related to nudity, especially as it relates to eroticism and the female figure. Full or partial nudity often indicated a figure as having an erotic purpose, as women with positions that rely on physical beauty (i.e. entertainers or courtesans) would often wear little to no clothing. Indeed, nearly every artistic convention focused on the erotic is depicted with female figures, and often related to grooming and self-presentation. Female professions like dancers, musicians, and serving girls were connected to the erotic ideals of youth and beauty, and images of these girls were depicted on toiletry and cosmetic objects[24]. However, even more than daily objects, most of the erotic art in Dynastic Egypt was funerary art. Images of erotic women and sensual displays of the female figure were key to restoring life to a man in the afterlife, as Lynn Meskell states "the sexual self was an integral part of the living, embodied individual"[25].

Sex, death, and religion were all deeply connected for Egyptians, and art often served to bring pleasure to the deceased long after they'd passed. Even beyond bringing sensual pleasures, looking one's best in the afterlife was an important aspect of funerary art, even for comparatively lower-class citizens. As Joyce Tyldesley says in her book on women in Dynastic society, "just as people today would prefer to be photographed in their best clothes, we must assume that those affluent enough to be recorded for posterity would choose to display their best or formal

[24] Meskell, *Private Life*, 97
[25] Ibid. 98-99

clothes"[26]. The spiritual and religious significance of funerary clothing has yet to be fully explored, but due to the importance of rituals and material culture in Egyptian conceptions of the afterlife, scholars speculate that these clothes had similar significance.

With all of the information established through artistic sources, several problems are evident in the conclusions brought by these artists. The biggest issue is that all of these pieces are created by men, either scribes or painters, which leads to an inherently incomplete picture of feminine life and an absence of female perspectives. This also leads to a focus on female sexuality almost exclusively, with male sexuality reserved for comedic contexts or displays of masculine power, such as the various erotic scenes of the Turin Papyrus[27]. Additionally, the scribes and artists creating these pieces usually depicted the upper echelons of society and had their work approved by those in power who commissioned the art. There is little representational art of the lower classes in everyday life, and even less outside of stand-ins for the wider populace in royal art. Due to these complications, one must take all forms of representational art with a grain of salt. However, interpreting the perception of women in art can be supplemented by knowledge of women's roles in Egyptian society.

Women in Dynastic Society

Egyptian women occupy a unique place within ancient studies. On the one hand, Egyptian women had far greater personal freedom compared to their Greek and Roman counterparts, to the point where that is often the focus of comparative gender studies in the ancient world. However, as Lynn Meskell says in her book, *Private Life in New Kingdom Egypt*, "previous studies tended to overplay the personal freedom of elite women, treating women as a

[26] Tyldesley, *Daughters*, 163
[27] *Graves-Brown*, *Sex and Gender*, 65

homogenous group without considering the entire social spectrum"[28]. Therefore, it is more productive to examine women's roles, not only in multiple branches of society, but also consider the various stratas of class and social standing.

Religion in Dynastic Egypt played a key role in women's lives, both in terms of available professions and effects on daily life. Religious institutions offered women one of the key ways to increase their social standing. While men occupied most of the high-ranking roles overall, and many cults were male-exclusive, upper-class women also occupied high priestess positions. As Joyce Tyldesley explains, "the male elite held important and high-profile positions… their wives were free to take an equally prominent corresponding interest in the local temple, particularly when that cult was that of a female deity"[29]. Additionally, women also had important roles in funerary rituals as professional mourners. In Lynn Meskell's book, *Archaeologies of Social Life*, she outlines how women were associated both with fertility and mourning- sex and death. While men are depicted as being solemn and sober, women gesture violently and wail, as was the custom for funerals of high-ranking citizens and royalty, occasionally wearing blue cloth tied around their heads to indicate the passing of the deceased. By the New Kingdom, mourning had become an almost exclusively female activity, as tomb paintings from many pharaohs of the era illustrate[30]. Just as mourners were a gendered profession, they were also status symbols for the person having the funeral. The average person could not have afforded the vast numbers of mourners depicted in the tomb paintings of kings. However, when it comes to the average woman's relationship with religion, most of their experiences will revolve around pregnancy,

[28] Meskell, *Private Life*, 108
[29] Tyldesley, *Daughters*, 122
[30] Lynn Meskell, Archaeologies of Social Life, (Hoboken, Blackwell Publishing, 1999), 126-127

and the divine connections to motherhood.

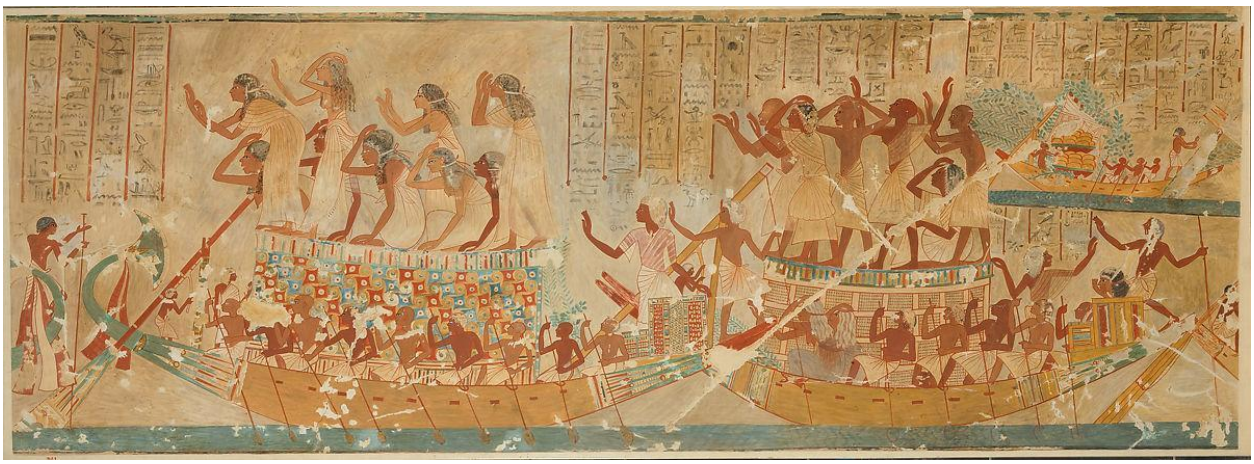

Fig. 6. Mourning procession: from de Garis Davies, Nina. "Boats with Mourners and Provisions, Tomb of Neferhotep." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 1931.

One important resource for New Kingdom women was goddess cults, which not only offered employment to women, but also emphasized the connection between spirituality and motherhood. Objects like votive sex organs and erotic statues found at temples to Hathor, the goddess of love and sexuality, were believed to facilitate pregnancy. Hathor in particular was connected to both male and especially female sexuality, with women in labor often holding Hathor jewelry or identified with the goddess when chanting birthing spells. She was an important deity, not only to the elites who served as her priestesses, but also to common women who featured her in domestic items and everyday objects. Pregnancy and birth were dangerous times for women, and deities like Hathor, Bes (a dwarf god), and Taweret existed as forces of protection for pregnant women. A combination of protective jewelry like amulets and necklaces and spoken magic protected the mother from pregnancy to birth, along with rattling instruments like ivory clappers and castanets which were believed to ward off hostile forces that would try to harm the mother or child[31]. But while Egyptian women's lives were mainly centered around

[31] Meskell, *Private Life*, 62-79

issues of motherhood and child rearing, this did not mean that their lives were completely under the control of men, specifically in regards to their legal freedoms.

One of the most frequently-cited examples of Egyptian women's greater freedom compared to their ancient world counterparts is their relatively high level of rights under the law. Women could own agricultural land, initiate court cases, and divorce their husbands, with any property that the woman brought into the marriage she could keep. Women could buy and sell goods, including cloth, a highly valued commodity as well as something that women could make in their homes. Since standardized currency would not become common until centuries later, women would often trade between each other and it was possible for women to accumulate their own wealth if they belonged to the right class[32]. Additionally, women could live alone without the supervision of a male family member and seemed to enjoy equal rights with men under the law.

However, this ignores several realities of life for the average Egyptian woman. Women's roles were largely relegated to the home and private life, focused on becoming mothers and providing for their families and, as Barbara Watterson says in *Women in Ancient Egypt*, "it is an uncomfortable fact that no woman could aspire to be a king's scribe, an army general, a governor, or an ambassador- the scope of her ambitions was strictly limited to those professions deemed suitable for women"[33]. Additionally, due to both the lack of documents penned by women and the lack of records relating to women outside the upper class, scholars are faced with an absence of female perspectives in New Kingdom records. While women in Egypt certainly had more societal freedom compared to those in the Greek and Roman world, this did not mean

[32] Ibid. 108-110
[33] Barbara Watterson, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, (Stroud, Amberley Publishing Limited, 2011), 53

that they were "equal under the law" and it also means that studying gender and its role in Egypt in particular, provides unique insight into New Kingdom society and culture.

Women in the Textile Industry

Now that the features of textile production and women in New Kingdom Egypt have been established, it is time to examine how these two spheres of life intersect, and what that means for Egyptian society.

Most women, as previously established, would make clothing and textiles for their families in their own homes. Most evidence of New Kingdom textile production and weaving in the home is at Amarna, which allows archaeologists a brief glimpse at life and societal structure in New Kingdom Egypt. In the book, *Technology and Urbanism in Late Bronze Age Egypt*, Hodgkinson outlines that Amarna was a good example of the various forms of textile production, both in the royal household and temple, and in domestic spaces at the Workman's Village[34]. As Aikaterini Koltside writes in her study on housing layouts at Amarna and Deir el-Medina, discoveries of horizontal looms indicated that weaving likely took place in the "front room" of the house, an unroofed space for the daily labor outside of dining and sleeping, i.e. animal keeping, grinding, and bread baking[35]. While this applies to "average" Egyptian women, weaving and spinning took place inside a compound within the larger houses of high officials. As Gay Robins says in her book *Women in Ancient Egypt,* women were evaluated based in their "productive capabilities," which meant that in addition to producing textiles of their families, any surplus textiles could also be traded and contributed to the family income, especially for any

[34] Anna Hodgkinson, *Technologies and Urbanism in Late Bronze Age Egypt*, (London, Oxford University Press, 2017) 52

[35] Aikaterini Koltsida, "Domestic Space and Gender Roles in Ancient Egyptian Village Households: A View from Amarna's Workmen's Village and Deir el-Medina" *British School at Athens Studies* 15 (Athens, British School at Athens, 2007) 122-124

women who owned land[36]. As there was no standardized currency throughout the ancient world, or even within Egypt itself, trade and barter used materials like grain, animal products, and linen as forms of payment. This led to the development of "cottage industries" in nearly every workman's village throughout the New Kingdom[37], which meant that those skilled in pottery, brewing, and yes, weaving and dressmaking could take advantage of a universal need and supplement their existing income. Not only were textiles an important economic factor in daily life, but a way for women to influence and contribute to their family finances.

Building on textile as a form of trade and economic production, women have played an integral part of the textile industry since the Early Dynastic Period. Old Kingdom texts and inscriptions refer to several women as "overseer of weavers/overseer of the house of weavers" and the Old Kingdom hieroglyph for weaving depicts a female figure[38], which means that textiles were exclusively produced and supervised by women. This is further supported by a late Middle Kingdom papyrus where, in a list documenting ninety-five slaves, most of the women are listed as weavers/spinners but none of the men. Within the royal harem, wives and concubines did some weaving themselves, but mostly taught and supervised other women in the weaving sheds[39] in order to produce work for the royal family and form the center of economic power for royal women. These workshops within large estates and temples provided the backbone for New Kingdom's textile industry, with women in other positions of the household taking up spinning and weaving during times of economic instability. As a Middle Kingdom lament described in Barbara Wayland's book on the history of weaving and gender put it, "lo, citizens are put to the

[36] Gay Robbins, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1993), 94
[37] Tyldesley, *Daughters*, 138
[38] Robbins, *Women*, 119
[39] Tyldesley, 131

grindstones… Wearers of fine linen are beaten with sticks... Ladies suffer like maidservants, singers are at the looms of weaving rooms, what they sing to the goddess are dirges"[40].

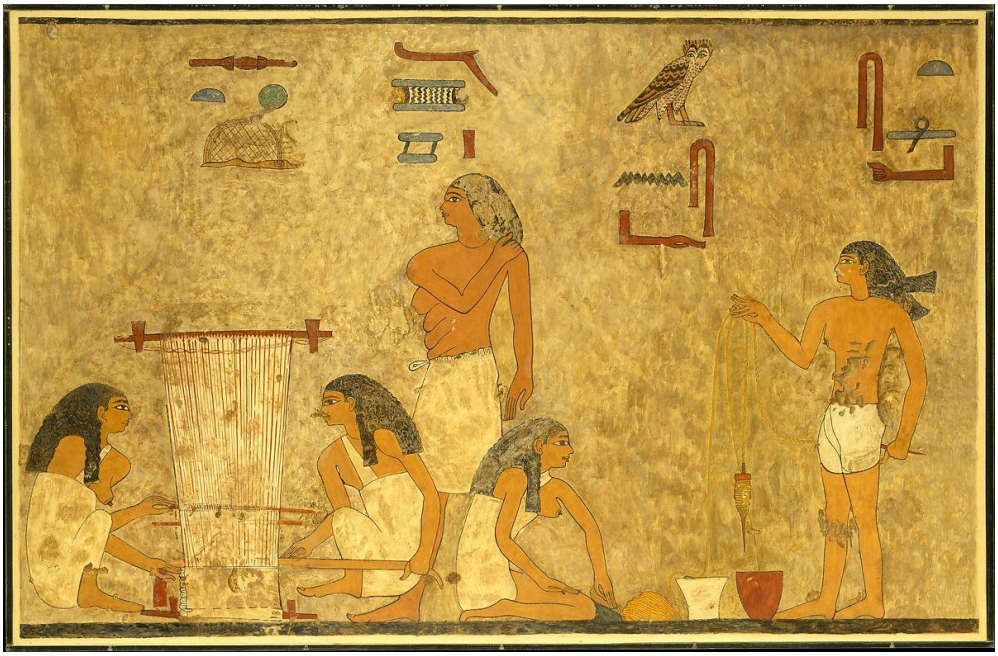

Fig. 7. Weaving workshop: from de Garis Davies, Norman. "Weavers, Tomb of Khnumhotep." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 1931.

Both on a domestic and state level, textile production was dominated by women. As demonstrated in the figure above, from the tomb of Khnumhotep from the Middle Kingdom, weavers and spinners both would've been women, with a female overseer depicted with the same physique as scribes, denoting her stature and authority over the others. This changed during the New Kingdom period, when tomb paintings and records began to display men and women amongst scenes of weaving. Indeed, lower-class Egyptian men often helped with household weaving and were even selectively employed at large-scale workshops in temples and wealthy estates[41]. This was the result of a new development in weaving technology: the vertical loom,

[40] Barbara Wayland, *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years of Women, Cloth, and Society*, (New York, W.W. Norton, 1996), 190
[41] Tyldesley, 131

introduced by the Hyksos during the Second Intermediate Period, which made production quicker and allowed for bolts up to 25 meters long and 2 meters wide[42]. As discussed in The Ancient Textile Industry at Amarna, scenes from the New Kingdom like the tomb of Neferrenpet demonstrating "the majority (four out of five) men on looms and women delivering spun yarn… seeing a link between the more demanding technology of vertical looms… but the written evidence argues for caution"[43]. That last point is especially important since, while there is documentation in both art and documents of greater male presence within the textile industry, there is still plenty of evidence for female weavers in the written documents like letters from Deir el-Medina for "sisters to weave a piece of linen" and an indictment from the 19th dynasty that mentions the chief workmen "forcing workmen's' wives to weave clothes for him"[44]. Regardless of the exact statistics, the important takeaway is that even within the greater gender integration within the New Kingdom,

Though there were those who distinguished themselves through either skill or class that could rise to positions of prominence, the true sources of most textiles came from common workers and servants. As both Vogelsang-Eastwood and Kemp outline in the section *The status and identity of textile workers*,

> By this period, textiles themselves had become enormously varied through the wider range of fibres, techniques, and types, and part of the development in specialist tasks reflects this. The general preference for undecorated and untailored linen pieces in the New Kingdom probably did not create nearly so many specialist niches… It was possible in New Kingdom Egypt for an individual craft specialist through exceptional personal

[42] Ibid. 132
[43] Kemp and Vogelsang-Eastwood, *Amarna Textile Industry*, 435
[44] Ibid. 435

> qualities to achieve rank and status...The bulk of textile producers, however, were generally treated collectively as people in some form of servitude…[45]

This means that not only could you have many workers producing new garments at once, but it was also likely that they would be trained in multiple aspects of textile production, allowing for greater flexibility within production and rotating roles even within one workshop.

However, on the subject of foreign trade, resources are somewhat scarce. The average citizen would have a limited field of interaction with those outside their communities and would not be able to afford costly imports for their daily use, so most examples of textiles in cultural exchange come from either the royal household or other elite families. Depictions of garments from neighboring kingdoms have been found in royal and noble tombs, notably textiles from Kush, such as the knotted over-the-shoulder cloak depicted in a stele from the 25th dynasty[46]. In addition to these artistic depictions, there are multiple literary sources that detail the important role that textiles played in foreign diplomacy. In *The Tale of Wenamun*, the titular protagonist is sent back to Egypt to replace the goods that were meant to pay a foreign prince after they were stolen, he mentions "ten garments of royal linen, five garments of fine linen, twenty *hrd*-garments of fine linen, and five hundred 'smooth' linen pieces"[47] in addition to the other expected commodities of gold and silver.

Additionally in the Amarna Letters, though the isolated nature of Amarna made international relations more tense, there are multiple mentions of similar linen pieces and garments in the inventory of both imported and exported gifts, often numbering nearly a thousand per group[48]. Scholars speculate that, if there was such a high demand for the creation of

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[45] Ibid. 434
[46] Hallmann, "Kushite Cloak", 15-16
[47] Kemp and Vogelsang-Eastwood, *Amarna Textile Industry*, 437
[48] William Moran, *The Amarna Letters*, (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 15-20

textiles as gifts to foreign rulers in addition to the already copious amount produced for the royal family, it is possible that there were weavers assigned to this particular task, or even present at foreign courts in order to appease Egyptian tastes. Regardless, it cannot be denied the importance that Egyptian linen had in other parts of the Near East, as well as the influence that those cultures had on Egypt's clothing tradition.

Conclusion

Though the resources for scholars today are scarce compared to crafts like pottery and sculpture, textiles still provide a valuable piece of information when understanding Egyptian society. From the involved process of preparing flax to spinning and weaving those completed fibers, documentation of these processes and the few surviving examples of textile work give scholars a vital glimpse into the lives of an often overlooked and marginalized group of workers and wives. The voices of women in Dynastic Egypt are rarely heard, especially due to their exclusion from the main sources of artistic and literary thought. These textiles then, from the simple loincloths to the elaborate tunics meant for kings, serve to remind archaeologists of the unseen forces that influenced the iconography and societal traits of New Kingdom Egypt. These workers and their supervisors were not only producing textiles for their families, but also providing income for their households, creating gifts for foreign diplomats, clothing the royal family, and collectively helped define what it meant to be “Egyptian”. These women were artists as well as providers, and only with diligent study can they be recognized for the importance they had both in the New Kingdom and beyond.

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